

GOODNIGHT STARS

ANNIE BELLET

FROM THE END IS NOW
EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS AND HUGH HOWEY

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THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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GOODNIGHT STARS

Annie Bellet

The redwoods whispered overhead in the warm summer breeze as Lucy Goodwin gathered another handful of fallen branches for the camp fire. She looked up at the sky, squinting in the afternoon sunlight. The meteor shower the night before had been amazing. She hoped she and her friends would be treated to more tonight. Everyone had asked her about meteor showers and the Perseids and all that space crap. It was embarrassing.

As if she knew anything just because her mother was on the Moon. She snorted. Mom was an engineer, not an astrophysicist. Though you'd never know from how hard she pushed sciences at her only kid.

“Can't wait to have the ‘you declared *what* major!’ conversation when she gets home,” Lucy muttered. All she and Mom did these days was fight, but it wasn't her fault. Lucy wanted to live her own life, not a life in her mom's shadow. One scientist in the family was plenty.

A smoky trail blazed through the sky and Lucy felt an odd pressure in her ears. It faded quickly, but the smoke still hung like some kind of brownish cloud. Repressing a shiver, Lucy headed back to camp.

Loud voices greeted her as she hiked out of the tree line to the ridge.

“Lucy!” Jack, her boyfriend, was waving his cell phone at her.

She sighed and picked up her pace. They’d declared the camping trip a tech-free zone, but apparently that was another promise Jack couldn’t keep.

Kayla, Ben, and Heidi were throwing things into backpacks. Something was definitely wrong.

“What happened?” Lucy asked, as she dropped her armload of sticks and ran forward.

“I got a message from Daniel. They’re calling up all the reservists and they are offering to re-up me, despite the leg.” Jack’s blue eyes looked panicked. He’d taken shrapnel in his left leg while in Afghanistan flying helicopters. He’d gotten medical leave and started classes at Berkeley, where she and Jack had met. He’d promised he was done with all things military, even getting his walking papers only weeks before. Lucy had started to believe him when she saw the signed papers.

“Who is calling up reservists? The Army?”

“Everyone,” Jack said. “Army, Navy, Air Force, National Guard. That’s what Daniel says anyway.”

“Tell her the rest, Jack, come on,” Heidi called from inside her tent.

“Jesus, Heidi, her mom’s on the Moon,” Jack said. He ran a hand through his light brown hair, still clutching the phone.

Lucy’s stomach turned to coiled rope and then knotted itself with a sickening twist. No one would meet her eyes as

she looked around the camp.

“Why are they calling everyone up? What about the damn Moon?” She stepped over a pile of tent poles and grabbed Jack’s arm, forcing him to look at her.

“Something hit the Moon. That’s why the meteors were so awesome last night. It was the Moon exploding.”

“Bullshit.” Lucy shook her head. That wasn’t possible. If the Moon had exploded, they would have seen that. It had been its usual crescent sailing along the horizon last night.

“Remember how Kayla said it looked lopsided to her?” Ben said. “The asteroid or whatever hit the back of it. That’s what the news sites were saying before reception cut out.”

“Fuck you guys if you are playing a trick on me,” Lucy said. She ducked into her and Jack’s tent, pulling her phone from her bag and powering it on. The phone sang to life with a little tune but remained stuck on the roaming screen, little multicolored dots dancing around in a circle as it struggled for reception.

Nobody could get reception. Resigned to figuring out if this was some hoax later, Lucy packed up with the rest of them. Kayla and Ben were an item lately and still in that new-couple-overwhelming-cuteness phase, so Heidi opted to ride with Jack and Lucy. Driving out of the Big Basin Redwoods state park, they stopped at the small gas station just outside, everyone in the car holding their phones, hunting for reception. Nothing.

Inside the gas station, there was a TV airing a news

channel. Lucy stood inside the air-conditioned doorway, frozen.

It wasn't a lie. Photos and images from all around the world were piling in. Meteors were striking major areas. Satellites were down all around the world. The President of the United States would have a message for everyone at 6 p.m. Eastern.

The Moon was gone. The images released thus far were of a cloudy mess. Words like "impact winter" and "massive meteor strikes" echoed from the TV. The lone attendant wasn't paying any attention to the register; he just stood, mouth half open, holding the remote like maybe if he could change the channel he could change the future.

The Moon was gone. The Far Side Array was on the Moon.

"Mom," Lucy said, not even realizing she'd spoken aloud until Jack put his arm around her.

"She probably got off the Moon. I mean, they have shuttles for that, right?" Jack said quietly.

"I don't know. It's only a few of them up on that station and they get stuck there for months at a time. Why didn't anyone see this coming?" Lucy shoved Jack away. "Why? How did this happen and nobody knows?" She was aware she was yelling and she didn't give two fucks.

"Uh," the attendant said, "Some black guy in a suit came on earlier and was talking about the angle of the sun and some shit. Apparently nobody saw it coming. Probably the

government is lying to us. They always are.”

Heidi spread her hands in a placating gesture that just annoyed Lucy more. “Please, Luce, we gotta get back home. I gotta call my mom, and call Dana. Let’s just go.”

Mom. Lucy pressed her lips together and breathed in through her nose. The store smelled like lemon cleaning fluid and stale beer, but it grounded her. She couldn’t get a hold of Mom even if she’d made it off the Moon. But Dad would know what was going on—he’d know what to do. And if meteors were going to strike Earth, Montana might be as safe a place as any.

Besides, Dad was like literally the only family she had left on this planet.

“No, we don’t want to be anywhere near the coasts if meteors are striking all over the planet,” she said, looking at Jack. “We’re going to my home. We’re going to Montana.”

On the TV, the news cut out and the high whining tone of the emergency broadcast station pierced the tense air in the store.

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Jack had agreed immediately, but Heidi was still sulking in the back seat as they left the serene park behind and entered a chaos of traffic. By the time they hit I-80 West toward San Jose, cars clogged the road heading into the city. It was a Sunday in August; the traffic shouldn’t have been so bad. Lucy’s cell phone still hunted for a signal. She dug out the

folding map of the United States from the Jeep's glove box. It was shiny and new, never used. Who needed a paper map when you had GPS on your phone?

She guessed Jack being a Boy Scout and Army brat was good for something. He took that *always be prepared* thing seriously.

“Last chance to get out and find a bus station or something,” Lucy said, leaning back over the seat and looking at Heidi.

“No,” Heidi said. She looked out the window at the clogged freeway. “I’ll go with you. I doubt they’re letting flights out, and I’d rather be with friends than alone.”

Which was good, Lucy thought. Because she’d never have really let Heidi go into the city by herself.

They cut around San Jose and headed down 580 toward Stockton, deciding to avoid I-5 North. The radio flip-flopped between static and emergency broadcasts telling people to stay in their homes. It was dark by the time they got near Stockton.

A gas station in Colfax was still open. Jack bought another gas can, filling it and adding it to the two he already kept in the back of Jeep. He topped those off, too.

“Smart thing, kids,” the old woman behind the counter said to them as they paid in cash. “Last can I have to sell. People been buying out all day going down this road toward Reno. We’re gonna be out of gas come tomorrow if the trucks don’t make it. Heard there are some fires up that way, so take

care.”

“You heard anything else?” Lucy asked, motioning to the TV. It was muted, just the bands of the Emergency Broadcast System twitching on the screen.

“Nothing useful,” the woman said. She smiled and shrugged her thin shoulders. “Keep calm and carry on.”

Her cackle followed them out of the station and all the way back to their car.

• • • •

The one and only time Lucy had made this drive was a year before, when she and her dad drove out to set her up at school. They’d stopped halfway through the seventeen-hour drive at a little bed and breakfast. He’d played basketball with the kids of the couple who ran the place while Lucy stood on the porch and answered awkward questions. Mom had been in training for the Moon mission, but try getting people to believe that no really, your mom was totally going to the Moon.

She’d shut off the radio over an hour before. Reno had seemed normal, almost calm. Lights still on, traffic thin. That might have been the tell that something was wrong with the world, Lucy guessed. Even on a Sunday night, traffic should have been jumping with people going out or coming home from the various entertainments Nevada’s cities had to offer. They’d grabbed snacks at another gas station but no one had felt like trying to find a restaurant or having much of a

conversation.

Now though, Jack was crashed out in the passenger seat, and Heidi had shoved camping gear down so she could sprawl on the back seat. The only noises were the sounds of the tires shushing along the road. The Jeep's headlights picked up a haze in the air and the sky was dark overhead, pierced occasionally with little flashes, like far-off lightning strikes.

Lucy had a feeling it wasn't lightning. She didn't want to think about the meteors. Thinking about it led to thinking about the Moon. About Mom.

She's probably in a damn bunker somewhere in Florida or Texas or something, Lucy told herself. She blinked away angry tears and tightened her hands on the steering wheel. She regretted the pizza stick she'd eaten as her belly flipped again. No thinking about Mom. Think about Dad. About getting home. Hours now—just a few more hours. If Jack had been awake, she would have made him check the map, check the mile markers. Five or six more hours, she guessed, before they hit US-93 and headed north for Montana. Then another six or seven hours. So maybe twelve, thirteen total.

She almost hit the first deer, but slammed on the brakes in time. Another leapt into the roadway. Then another.

“Jesus fuck,” Jack said, jerking awake as the sudden stop slammed him into his seatbelt.

“Look,” Lucy said. “What are they doing?”

There was a huge cracking noise overhead, and the road seemed to roll up beneath them. Out of the brush at the sides

of the highway, hundreds of deer sprang forward, flooding into the road and then across and down the other side. They were clearly fleeing something.

“What is that?” Heidi asked, her voice heavy with sleep and fear.

The huge herd of deer had cleared. Beyond, out in a darkness lit now with an odd, almost nuclear glow, a cloud rushed at them, looking like a giant white wave.

“No idea,” Lucy said. She stomped on the gas. “Seatbelts!”

The Jeep was no sports car, but she was pretty sure she went from zero to eighty in record time. Dust and chunks of turf, pebbles, and demolished brush slammed into the windows and scraped along the sides of the vehicle. The right tire hit the drunk bumps on the side of the road and Lucy aimed straight, keeping the ridges beneath them so she could feel her way down the road. Pale flashes of the white lines on the road through the smoke helped keep her on track.

The air cleared after a few miles, and she found herself praying under her breath as the headlights lit upon dark asphalt. She pulled the Jeep back left, into the road proper.

“You’re lucky you didn’t blow the tires,” Jack said. His voice sounded more awed than reproachful.

“Driving by Braille,” Lucy said, shooting him a quick smile. A pain hit her heart. That saying was something her mother always said, usually to excuse the way she often wandered on the road a little, her brain lost in some scientific

minutia.

“Did we just survive a meteor strike?” Heidi asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“We good on gas?”

Lucy checked the gauge. “Yeah. I can keep driving. Though now I gotta pee.”

“That’s all of us, after that,” Heidi said.

No one slept again that night, though Lucy guessed Jack could have. He was the only one of them used to this. She finally asked him as they neared Elko around dawn.

“This is like war, kinda, huh? Are you going to be okay?”

They didn’t talk about his service. Jack had joined up after his parents were killed in a car accident when he was seventeen. He’d told her he was a helo pilot, and the one time she’d asked him if he’d shot anyone, he just shook his head. Lucy was glad about that. She might have been raised in Montana where being able to walk meant you were old enough to learn to use a gun, but she didn’t like the idea of them, and her politics leaned further left than even her extremely progressive parents’.

“This is nothing like the war,” Jack said. The look on his face closed that line of conversation, and Lucy kept driving.

Elko was silent, the houses shuttered and nothing open. They drove another hour, the gas light flickering on, and debated using one of the tanks. Jack voted they should wait and see if one of the little stops between Elko and Wells had anything.

Before Wells, where they would turn north onto US-93, they found an open gas station and everyone got out to stretch and check their phones.

“Those won’t work,” the attendant said. He was a middle-aged man, on the small side, barely taller than Lucy, with a big round belly and white beard any mall Santa Claus would’ve been proud of. He’d come out of his little booth to chat, seemingly glad to see live people on the road. “Got a brother with the Sheriff’s office. Said that all stable frequencies for the radio and phones are being routed for emergency personnel only.”

“So how the hell do you call 911?” Heidi asked.

“Times like these?” He motioned up to the clouded-over sky where small flashes still glinted every now and again in the diffuse morning sun. “You don’t.”

Lucy shook her head. The roads had been clear so far, other than some plant debris and dirt. They were moving, however, toward heavily forested areas. Remembering the pictures of the Tunguska Impact, she climbed back into the Jeep to study the map again.

A big truck roared into the station as Jack was finishing with the pump. Three big white men, mid-twenties to thirties, jumped out, whooping. Two of them were carrying machetes.

Lucy froze as the one without a knife grabbed Heidi and swung her around, pulling her tight against his body.

“You just back off, old man. We’re commandeering this station. It’s the end of the fucking world, don’t you know?”

The oldest-looking one, a man with a reddish beard and blue overalls, waved his machete at the attendant.

“That isn’t a good idea,” Jack said. His voice was all steel, his hands at his sides, but Lucy knew the look of readiness when she saw it. He was going to get himself killed, the big damn soldier.

She let the map drop slowly to the seat and followed it down. No one was looking at her; their eyes were on Jack and the attendant. With her right hand, she felt under the driver’s seat until she found Jack’s gun case. Still bent low, she slid the Glock from the case, checked the magazine and made sure a round was already chambered. Her heart raced miles ahead of her fear, but she shoved away all the anxiety, the shake in her fingers.

Instead she reached for her dad’s voice. “Never point a gun at something you aren’t willing to shoot,” he had told her. “Never point a gun at a man unless you want him dead. If you aren’t willing to make him dead, you might as well put the gun in his hand and tell him to pull the trigger.”

She didn’t want to kill anyone. But the way that man was groping her sobbing friend, the way Jack looked ready to try to take on three big men with no weapons, well. There were no police to call. No one to stop this. Just her.

Lucy slid out of the Jeep and came around the side, raising the gun and pointing it at the man in overalls. He’d talked, so she was pretty sure he was the boss.

“Let her go, and get the fuck out of here,” she said. Her

voice was low and mean and only shook a little. *Channel Dirty Harry*, she told herself. *Dad made me watch all those old movies, might as well get some use out of it.*

“Ooh, look Jerry.” One of the other men, the one not holding Heidi, laughed. “The spic cunt there wants us to leave.”

“You going to shoot, girl?” Overalls asked. He sneered, but his eyes were shadowed by what she hoped was fear.

“She ain’t gonna shoot,” the other guy said. “Those Mexican bitches can’t . . .”

Whatever he would have said was cut off by the loud report of the gun and a scream. Lucy swung the gun smoothly back to Overalls as the other guy fell to the ground, dropping his machete and holding his bleeding crotch.

“I’m Puerto Rican, you ignorant fuck,” she said.

Whatever Overalls saw in her face then, he didn’t like. He dropped his machete and hissed at the man holding Heidi to let her go as he raised his hands and backed toward their truck.

The attendant bolted for his hut and came out with a shotgun. “Get out of here and don’t come back or I’ll put more holes in you!” he yelled after them.

They grabbed up their bleeding friend and drove their truck out of there faster than they’d arrived.

“Oh my god. You shot him. You really shot him!” Heidi was freaking out.

“Give me the gun,” Jack said softly. He gently took it from

her numb fingers.

“I’m okay,” Lucy said. Her teeth chattered. Shock. Maybe this was shock. She wasn’t sure. She’d really shot him.

“How much for the gas,” Jack said. He flicked the safety on and kept the gun low at his side.

“No charge. Just get where you are going and keep these ladies safe, eh?” The man smiled a gap-toothed smile. “Shit raining from the skies does terrible things to people. And you, little lady, you did right. Don’t you fear no retribution. Those bastards are cowards. They’ll look for other targets that don’t shoot back.”

“Then I wish I’d killed them,” Lucy muttered. She wasn’t sure if she meant it or not.

Jack drove. Heidi sat in back, staring out the window, not talking. Lucy glanced over her shoulder at her friend a few times, but Heidi wouldn’t meet her eyes, even in the reflection of the window.

They turned north onto US-93 and it was clear meteors had hit near here. Branches were down in the road and they were forced to slow. They passed a couple cars heading south, but the drivers only waved and didn’t stop to share news.

“What’s that haze?” Lucy said finally, breaking the silence that had descended since the gas station.

“Forest fire, I think. It’s pretty far off though.”

“I’m sorry, Jack,” she said softly. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Sorry? For what? You saved us back there. I was going to try to get them with prayer and my bare hands.”

“I shot a man.”

“I know. It isn’t easy. But you winged his nuts. Not like he’s dead.”

“I was aiming for his chest,” Lucy said.

Jack looked sideways at her and a small smile played at his lips. “No you weren’t,” he said.

“No,” Lucy said. A weird giddiness rose in her, threatening to turn into a hysterical giggle. “I wasn’t.”

“You asked if this was like war? Back there, it kind of was.” He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. She loved that gesture. She’d been so mad at him about something—she was always mad about something—but right then she wanted to kiss him, to curl up in his arms and pretend the world was just fine.

“You’ve shot people.” It wasn’t a question, not anymore.

He dodged answering it anyway. “Times like these, you figure out who you are. Deep inside. Some people can’t do what has to be done. Some can.”

“Fuck you,” Heidi said from the back seat.

“That guy was huge, Heidi. There wasn’t anything you could have done. No more than Luce here could’ve stopped them if they’d grabbed her. She found a tool and she used it. We survived. That’s how it works.”

Heidi’s eyes were bright with tears and her hands fisted in her t-shirt. “Not how I want my life to work,” she whispered.

“We’ll find you a way to Chicago, Heidi,” Lucy said.
“Once we’re home.”

“Sure,” Heidi said and went back to staring out the window.

They had to get out twice to clear larger branches, and once, nearly half a tree from the road. No more weird cracks of light lit the sky, but the sun was obscured in the haze and the dust and smoke were so heavy that they had to breathe through their shirts.

Heidi took over so Lucy could rest. She still refused to say more than a syllable or three.

Lucy must’ve dozed off, though she felt for a while as the rough road chunked and thunked away beneath the Jeep that she’d never sleep again. Not until she knew Dad was safe. Not until she knew for sure about the Moon. About Mom.

The cessation of road noise woke her.

“Where are we?” she asked Jack. Heidi wasn’t in the driver’s seat.

“Outside Darby. We’re on a side-road. Some guys were heading out to try to clear a rockslide or something on the highway, so they told us to detour down this Old Darby Road. Heidi had to pee.” He motioned out the window with a grin.

“You stopped and talked to people and I didn’t wake up?” Lucy rubbed her eyes and caught a whiff of her morning breath. She sat up and reached for a water bottle.

“A regular sleeping beauty,” Jack said, pushing some of her hair from her face. “Speaking of that, you’re Puerto

Rican?”

“Half,” she said, making a face. “My parents named me Lucita, but I hate it.” It seemed so trivial now. All through middle school and high school, she’d just wanted to be one of the pale, pretty blondes. She’d bleached her hair, worn contacts, put on foundation that was two shades too light for her complexion. Gone by Lucy instead of Lucita. Lucy Goodwin had tried so hard to leave everything of her mother and her mother’s history behind. Her language. Her culture. Her religion. Her science.

And now all I want to do is get home and tell her how sorry I am and promise we’ll never argue again. Ever.

“Wait,” she said as Jack started to get out of the car. “Darby? That means we’re like an hour or so from home.” She threw open the door and came around to his side, pulling him down for a kiss as he climbed out and wrapped her in his arms.

“I can’t believe you are from a place called Lolo.” He grinned.

“The farm is outside Lolo. Geez.”

“A farm like this?” Jack motioned around them.

Heidi had stopped along the road at a gravel driveway that stretched back down a lane of poplar. In the distance Lucy could make out the roof of a farmhouse, one of the classic two-story ones, probably made with stone and logs, the roof looking like slate from this distance in the hazy afternoon light. The air was dusty but cool, carrying an almost metallic

tang. Looking up, Lucy couldn't find where the sun should be.

"It should be a lot hotter this time of year," she said.

"Too much shit in the atmosphere, I guess," Jack said. He let her go and walked a little ways toward some bushes.

"Heidi, you get eaten by a bear?"

"Oh my god, are there bears around here?" came the shrieking reply.

Lucy mouthed *asshole* at Jack, who grinned.

A high whining noise broke the still air, as though a jet engine had materialized somewhere above them. Before Lucy could do more than look up and then back at Jack, a cracking boom sounded, the reverberations rattling through her bones and teeth like thunder from the worst summer storm she'd ever seen.

"Get back in the car," she yelled. "Heidi!"

It was too late. The road rippled, and the trees seemed to burst apart on the far side where they hadn't been cleared for farmland. A wave like the one before, this one churning and brownish-gray, descended on them. Lucy tried to get into the Jeep, but the wave caught her, throwing her into the air and over the low wooden fence. She hit the ground with a crunch that knocked away what little air was left in her lungs. The shockwave smashed her flat and she clung to the ground, her arms around her head, her eardrums pulsing as though she'd dove too deep into water.

Then it was gone, the horrible pressure lifting, her ears

ringing and throbbing. Lucy uncurled slowly, wiggling her fingers and then her toes. Nothing seemed broken, though her mouth tasted like grit and blood. She spit and pulled her torn, grimy tee-shirt up over her nose and mouth.

Dust clogged the air, stinging particles rasping on her skin. She squinted and shaded her eyes with one hand, trying to make out anything.

It wasn't just the ringing in her ears. Someone was screaming. Lucy moved toward the voice, stepping over the scattered remains of the low wood fence. The Jeep loomed ahead and appeared mostly intact. She couldn't see Jack or Heidi.

She stumbled toward the screams and nearly fell down the embankment into what was left of the bushes Heidi had been using as a makeshift toilet. A smear of blue and red caught her eye, and Lucy kicked her way through the debris.

Heidi lay half on the ground, half-impaled on the jagged remains of a sapling. Blood gushed, dark and lazy, from her chest and trickled out of her gasping, screaming mouth. Jack was kneeling at her side, his tee-shirt off, revealing a back bloodied with cuts.

This time, Lucy didn't freeze. She pulled off her own shirt and ran forward, offering it to Jack to help stop up the blood oozing from around the stick in Heidi's chest.

He shook his head and tried to say something, but coughed instead. That was when Lucy saw his left arm. At first her brain refused to make sense of it. She thought he had a piece

of tree sticking out of his arm and made an aborted motion to pull it free from his skin.

That was when she realized it wasn't a stick. That *was* his left arm. Or at least the bone. The humerus, she remembered from high school biology. There was nothing funny about it. Giggles tightened her chest and she turned her head, vomiting water and bile into the dirt.

Jack yelled again and she made out that he wanted her to tie off her shirt around his upper arm. Blood ran in a dirty crimson river down his useless hand. Sucking in a breath that was more grit than air, Lucy did as he asked, amazed he didn't pass out.

"Big damn soldier," she muttered, knowing he couldn't hear her.

"Hey," a voice boomed from the haze, followed by two people, a man and a woman. They had on gasmasks and goggles over their eyes. The woman had a rifle.

Lucy blinked grit from her eyes and waved to them. If they wanted to kill her or do something all Texas Chainsaw Massacre, she wasn't in any state to stop them. She just had to trust now that her dad was right, and that most people were good people.

He was right. They were good people.

Maddie Grace and her son Victor managed to get Heidi free of the tree, cutting the sapling out from under her. She was bundled into a quilt for the short run back to the farmhouse, where Victor's wife Angel waited with two scared

but curious kids. Lucy found out their names as she was bundled into a comfortable country kitchen. Gas lamps were lit and Angel got to work on cleaning Lucy's cuts.

Heidi had stopped screaming. Angel said that Victor was a paramedic, had been with the army, too. He'd see to her friends.

Lucy didn't argue, though she felt like a coward. She didn't think she could face more blood and pain. Every cut, every bruise, every ache and pain woke up and tried to voice how much her body hated her all at once. Her ears wouldn't equalize, and she wasn't sure she could hear at all from the left one.

Maddie Grace appeared in the doorway, grief and determination etched in the heavy lines of her face.

"You'll be wanting to say goodbye," she said.

"Jack? But it was just his arm—" Lucy stood up too quickly and the world spun.

"No, not your man. The girl."

Guilt wracked Lucy, but she shoved it away. It was like Jack said. Act now, process later.

"Of course," she said. She walked forward, following Maddie Grace into what had been a utility room but was now a makeshift surgery. A folding table, the kind you might use for a picnic or impromptu card game, held Heidi's still body. Bloody rags were gathered in a tidy pile to one side, and Victor stood, his head hanging, tears dripping off his thick nose.

Jack lay half propped in a folding chair, his arm still wrapped in her tee-shirt. He looked up at Lucy and held out his good hand to her.

She ignored it, going to Heidi's side on the table. Lucy wrapped her fingers around her friend's and was surprised when Heidi's eyes flickered and she weakly squeezed back.

"I'm sorry," Lucy said. All she did was argue with people, and then her last words were always anger or apology. She blinked at tears, trying to smile at her friend. "You stay with us, okay? We're right here. You aren't alone."

Heidi's mouth moved, but whatever she said was lost as she went rigid. She shook her head, and then started to choke. Victor moved in, propping up her head, trying to get her to breathe, his words a string of soothing nonsense.

Heidi stilled. Lucy had seen animals put down before, had seen that moment when a being went from life to death. It was disturbingly similar and yet more terrible, now. One moment her friend was there, struggling for air, bleeding out on the table. The next, no one was home.

Lucy collapsed, and all the tears she'd held back over the last hellish day found freedom now and scraped hotly down her cheeks. Jack tried to get up, but Victor told him to sit.

It was Maddie Grace who wrapped her wiry, strong arms around Lucy's shoulders and guided her into a cozy family room, pressing her gently onto the couch. Someone found a shirt for her, something clean. Tea was pressed into her hands. A handkerchief for her tears. Still the tears came.

Finally, cried down to dry sobs, the tea a minty memory in her throat, Lucy passed out.

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“It will be dark soon. We can go tomorrow,” Jack said.

“Yeah, it’ll be dark soon, but I don’t care. I’m going home, Jack. I am not waiting any longer. Victor said the Jeep will run. He changed the tire for me and cleared out the broken glass. I’m going home.” Lucy rubbed her hands down her borrowed shirt. She’d slept for over an hour, but that was long enough. Every ache and cut told her that Jack was right, that she should stay where she was safe and sleep some more.

But this wasn’t home.

“Your dad can wait a day,” Jack said. He struggled to sit upright on the pull-out couch, and she could see he was in horrible pain even through the morphine Victor had given him.

“What if he can’t?” Lucy shot back. “The last thing I said to her was so mean, Jack. I told her I wished I had a mother who could understand, a mother like my friends’ moms. I have to go home. I can’t let my last words to Mom be the last thing said in our family.”

“She might be alive.”

“No,” Lucy said. The word hurt to say, but it rang inside her aching heart with a truth she couldn’t explain. “I can feel it. She’s gone.” Like Heidi. Like god knew how many people. Even the radios were out; Maddie Grace’s family had no

recent news.

“Fine. I’m going too.” Jack tried to swing his legs over to the side and cried out in pain as the movement jolted his arm.

“No. It’s only an hour away. Stay here. Maddie Grace said she doesn’t mind. They can run you up to the farm when you are better, or I’ll come back and get you in a day or two. I gave them directions.” Lucy walked over to him and bent down, kissing his damp forehead. He felt feverish, and she made a note to tell Victor on her way out.

“I love you, Luce,” Jack said.

“Damn well better. I shot a dude in the balls for you.” She fought more tears as she smiled. This would not be their last conversation—she was determined about that. But if it was . . . if, well, she wouldn’t leave with angry words. Not this time. “I love you, too, you big damn soldier.”

The US-93 was a wreck of debris and branches. Lucy put the Jeep’s four-wheel drive through its paces. It was full dark when she spotted the bright yellow reflectors on the mailbox at the end of her driveway shining like welcome home beacons through the haze.

She pulled up at the house, eyes searching for a light in the dark. She heard the screen door bang open as she stumbled up the steps and blinked as a flashlight poured warm light over her.

“Daddy?” she said.

“Lucita! Lucy!” he dropped the flashlight and wrapped her in his arms. She pushed her nose into his soft flannel shirt and

breathed in the familiar smell of vanilla pipe tobacco, horses, and mint.

“Dad, I’m home,” she said, laughing into his chest.

“Yes, yes you are.”

• • • •

The meteor strike outside Darby was the closest anything large got to Lolo, Montana. The impact haze—as the news radio, when it was working, called it—persisted. They were in for what was called an impact winter. No one knew how long it would last. Years, was the guess. Nobody could say what the death toll was. The coastal regions had been hit hard with tsunamis. Miami was rumored to be gone, struck directly by a large chunk of Moon debris. The equatorial zones were the hardest hit, but Lucy didn’t regret fleeing California.

Three months, and they were crawling on toward real winter. Jack had shown up after a week with Maddie Grace and Victor in tow, bringing a crate of pickles with them. His arm wasn’t fully healed even months later, but he was learning how to use his fingers again and doing the exercises Victor ordered him to. Lucy was a little jealous about how well Jack and her dad got along, but she figured they might have to cohabitate for a while, so she didn’t say too much about it.

Victor said they’d buried Heidi by a really pretty dogwood that had survived the shockwave. No one knew how to get a message to Chicago and her family. Lucy vowed that

someday she would make that journey and tell Heidi's mom and sister where their daughter was buried.

She knew, deeply, how crushing a lack of closure could be.

No one talked about Mom. Not after the first night, when Lucy had asked about the Moon and all her dad said was "Yes, it's true" and they'd left it at that.

Almost three months. It felt like three minutes sometimes.

Lucy leaned on the porch rail, hands tucked into her coat, watching the hazy sky darken. There were no more flashes in the night, at least in this area, but there were no stars either. No sun except a slightly brighter patch of sky some afternoons. The farm had its own generator and well, but they rationed everything. The National Guard had been through from Missoula, clearing the roads and bringing news and fuel. That was all they had of the outside world. There had been no news of Mom or the people on the Moon. It was like the world was pretending no one had been there.

Crunching gravel pulled Lucy from her melancholy. A Hummer crept up the driveway, looking dark and military and official.

"Dad," she yelled. Jack was out at the barn, but her father was inside, whipping up his famous camp stove chili they were all too nice to tell him they were sick to death of eating.

He came out on the porch with his .22 rifle in hand. He looked older to Lucy, his hair grayer and lines forming around his mouth and eyes she didn't remember being there before. He was still tall and solid and calm, though.

Two men in fatigues came out first, nodding to Lucy and her father.

“You Paul Goodwin?” one man asked.

“I am,” her dad said. He gently propped the gun against the house and walked forward to the steps.

A woman climbed out of the vehicle, assisted by one of the men in fatigues. She was pregnant, her belly pushing out heavily against her navy blue pea-coat. She was thin except for that belly, and pretty. She looked up at Dad, then at Lucy, and walked forward, a small bag in her hand.

“My name is Shannon,” she said, a soft English accent lilting her voice. “I served with Neta on the Far Side Array.”

“No—” Dad half cried out, his fist pressing into his lips. Lucy grabbed for his arm and leaned into him.

It was one thing to believe that Mom was dead. It was another to see this woman, to hear her use the past tense, and know it for real.

“Is that?” Lucy said, motioning toward the bag. Had they brought only her body back? Cremated her?

“What? No,” Shannon said. “This is, I mean, she recorded a message. We couldn’t all go home, there wasn’t space.”

A man behind Shannon coughed loudly, his expression a warning.

“Bloody hell, Wentworth. It’s Neta’s family. They deserve to know the truth.” She turned back to Lucy and her dad.

“Your mom chose to stay so that I could come home . . . she knew I was pregnant.”

“Neta would do that,” Dad said. Tears reddened his eyes, but he managed a smile. “God, she would do that.”

“This is her last message. Do you have power? It had a full charge when we left, but if you need more, we can hook up a battery for you.” Shannon walked to the edge of the stairs, holding out the bag.

“We have enough,” Lucy said, stepping down from the porch and taking the bag. It felt like a small laptop was inside. “So she’s really gone,” she whispered to Shannon.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, she is,” Shannon said. She looked like she might cry, too.

Lucy nodded and pressed her lips together. “Thank you,” she said.

“I’m sorry if we don’t ask you to stay,” her dad said as Lucy turned and climbed the steps.

“I understand,” Shannon said.

Lucy hugged her father’s side, and they watched as the woman and her escort got back into their car and made a swinging turn, driving off down the road in a swarm of dust.

They played the message on the military’s portable DVD player, just the two of them, not calling Jack in from the barn in unspoken agreement. Lucy loved Jack, but this was a family thing.

Mom seemed so composed on the screen, but so tiny. Her face was lined and tired, her dark eyes bright, her words steady and full of love. There was no reproach, no anger, no blame.

She even called Lucy *Lucy*.

And then that final moment, just before the message cut out, when the tears broke for a shining second from her mother's eyes, and she whispered to the camera: "Love her, Paul. Give our little light all the love I won't be there to give. And don't hang on to me. I want you both to live, to be happy."

Lucy bolted from the kitchen and out onto the porch, sobbing. Her dad joined her, his big arms wrapping around her shoulders and pulling her into his warm, flannel-covered chest.

"I was so mad at her," she said, her breath misting in the freezing air. "But I didn't mean it. I didn't."

"She knew, Luce, she knew." He pressed his lips into her hair and rocked her gently.

"I can't tell her though. She's gone. Just . . . gone."

"She isn't gone. Your mother is not gone." The force of his words shocked Lucy, and she pulled away a little to stare up into his face. "Are the stars gone?" He pointed at the sky.

"What? No, we just can't see them."

"Exactly, Lucita. They are still there, just like your mom. Invisible, but shining down on us all the same."

They stood for a long time out on the porch, until Jack's footsteps roused them.

"You coming inside?" Jack asked, looking them over, questions in his eyes.

Lucy nodded. She slipped her hand into his good one and

took a last look at the sky. Invisible, but still there. She squeezed Jack's fingers and walked through the door.

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Famine. Death. War. Pestilence. These are the harbingers of the biblical apocalypse, of the End of the World. In science fiction, the end is triggered by less figurative means: nuclear holocaust, biological warfare/pandemic, ecological disaster, or cosmological cataclysm.

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[GOODNIGHT STARS](#)

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